

EMBASSY OF THE UNITED STATES
BAGHDAD, IRAQ

Transcript

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AMBASSADOR CHRISTOPHER R. HILL
BRIEFING WITH ARAB PRESS

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AMBASSADOR HILL: Well, thank you very much, and thanks for coming. We have been planning to do this for some time, so I am sorry there was a delay. But I'm pleased to meet with you all today.

So, we thought this was a good time maybe to discuss, generally, the course of U.S.-Iraqi relations, but also, if you like, to discuss some of the political events that have been going on in Iraq. We have had, as you know, some recent visitors. We had Assistant Secretary Jeff Feltman, who just completed a three-day visit here in Iraq. And we look forward to other visitors. And I think it's really commensurate with what we have, in terms of a long-term relationship with Iraq.

Let me just say, though, very briefly, we are pleased that the recount was completed last week. We look forward to certification, and we especially look forward to the Iraqi political coalitions getting together and working on formation of the government. Formation of a government is, of course, not an American issue. It is an Iraqi issue. It is an issue that the Iraqi political leaders need to resolve. Obviously, we, along with many other countries, have an interest in seeing the process move forward so that our relationship with Iraq can move forward.

QUESTION: (Via translator) Mr. Ambassador, after the results of the first session of the parliament, is it possible that the United States play a role to melt the ice between the various political entities, especially the bigger entities, to help move the process forward?

AMBASSADOR HILL: Well, within the context of the fact that this is an Iraqi process, not an American process, not anyone else's process, it's for Iraq, we would like to be helpful, in terms of getting people together and getting people in a productive dialogue. We would like to see a government formed that will be able to take on many of the problems that Iraq citizens face every day, whether it is security or economic issues. We want to see the government get on with dealing with those issues. And so, I can assure

you we will be very active, but we will be active in a very appropriate and respectful way that is respectful toward Iraqi sovereignty.

And again, I want to stress I realize I run the risk of having repeated myself too many times, but the United States desires a long-term friendly relationship with Iraq, and that long-term friendly relationship needs to be based on our mutual respect, respect for sovereignty, but also a great interest in Iraq making progress. We, the United States, have a great interest in the success of the Republic of Iraq.

QUESTION: (Via translator) Mr. Ambassador, you said repeatedly that the United States doesn't want to intervene in this process because it's an Iraqi process. But we have learned that there is an initiative by the State Department to bring the views of the various parties together.

Is it possible that you see that the Iraqi crisis right now is very deep, and requires you to exert more effort to bring people together?

AMBASSADOR HILL: Well, I think in any of these situations you would like to see more dialogue and greater speed in creating a new government. I don't think that's unusual. It's certainly something that people feel in other countries. So it's not an unusual circumstance. So, it is quite true that we would like to do what we can do, appropriately, to help people get together, and help the process of dialogue.

But again, I want to stress our interest is in having a long-term relationship here. After all, this embassy, these buildings, are not temporary buildings. These are long-term buildings. This is the largest embassy complex we have in the world. So, we have a commitment to staying here. And the best way to assure that that commitment is fulfilled is if we are seen by all the Iraqi people as good guests.

So I think, just as if you're invited to a friend's home for dinner, you shouldn't be telling them how to cook the meal.

QUESTION: (Via translator) Do you think, Mr. Ambassador, the delay in forming the government will affect the withdrawal of U.S. forces?

AMBASSADOR HILL: I prefer to look at those as rather separate issues. The U.S. troops are here pursuant to the Security Agreement reached between the United States and Iraq in December of 2008. The troops must all have completed their mission by the end of 2011, because that is when the Security Agreement expires.

During that time, both by bilateral agreement, but also by undertakings of ours, we agreed, for example, on June 30, 2009 to withdraw all our troops from the cities, towns, and localities. And we accomplished that on time, as required by the agreement. Our President also made a commitment to reduce our troops to 50,000 by the beginning of September 2010. And we will accomplish that, per the order of our President.

I don't think any of the duties of our troops -- which increasingly have been to assist Iraqi troops -- I don't think any of the duties of our troops involves, for example, the problems we are dealing with now, this government formation issue. So, I think those issues do run on separate tracks.

QUESTION: (Via translator) Mr. Ambassador, you heard about the meeting that President Talabani led between the various political parties. Do you think that the problems -- some people think that this is not going to work. Do you think that the problems in Iraq are very deep, that the neighboring countries are controlling the dialogue inside Iraq? Do you think that we reached that point?

AMBASSADOR HILL: No, I don't think we have reached the point that the neighboring countries are somehow controlling the dialogue. I think the dialogue is being controlled within Iraq. I really do. I would rather not get into commenting on individual initiatives for dialogue of the kind you've mentioned. I mean, as a general proposition, we include any and all efforts for people to get together and try to address the political differences.

You know, in a parliamentary democracy, the idea of taking a long time for government formation is not unusual. This happens, for example, in European parliamentary democracies. I think what's important is, as a government formation process goes forward, whether in Iraq or in some other country, you need to make sure that you have a government that is operating, that is continuing to fulfill its obligations.

So, I think we have seen that Iraq has a government that is continuing to perform its functions. We have a presidency which is doing so, as well. I think the one issue has been the fact that we have been without a parliament for a couple of months. So, of course, with the expectation that the vote will be certified, we would look forward to the convening of the new parliament very soon.

QUESTION: (Via translator) Mr. Ambassador, I think that the withdrawal of U.S. forces would lead the country to a crisis situation. I would like to hear your view. Also, the Iranian fingerprints are all over the process here in Iraq, and they play a very big role. How do you explain the silence of the Americans witnessing that?

And if you can, give me one indication, Mr. Ambassador, about -- that the dialogue in Iraq is not driven by other countries, like you just mentioned.

AMBASSADOR HILL: Well, first of all, do not confuse silence with inactivity. And I think it's very important for the United States not to be perceived by the Iraqi people as somehow intervening in the political situation here, and getting up and making pronouncements of what people should do, as if we are some kind of schoolteacher.

You mentioned a crisis being caused by the U.S. troop withdrawal. I would actually suggest a different way to think of that. Imagine the crisis that there would be if there were a perception that the U.S. was somehow violating the terms under which our troops are here.

You know, Iraqis and Americans have not had a lot of time to get to know each other. And I am the first to acknowledge that these have been seven very difficult years during which to get to know each other. But what I do want to make sure that we are conveying to the Iraqi people is we are a country of our word, meaning that if we reach an agreement on the withdrawal of our forces, Iraqi people can be sure that we will do what we have agreed to do.

With regard to Iran or any other neighboring country, if they desire a long-term relationship with Iraq, they too must respect Iraq's sovereignty, and live up to their word. But I can assure you as someone who follows very closely the political developments here, follows very closely the political personalities here, who talks many times to these political personalities, I can tell you that this government is being formed in Iraq.

And so, I know it is difficult for people who are not used to this process to see these weeks and even months go by, but I think Iraqis should realize that, in the end, that this will be better for Iraq if people can show patience, can show strength, and go through this period and understand that, at the end, there will be a good government which is truly made in Iraq.

QUESTION: (Via translator) Mr. Ambassador, there was supposed to be a visit by Vice President Biden to Iraq. And this visit was either postponed or canceled. Was that done by the request of the Iraqi Government, or –

AMBASSADOR HILL: Vice President Biden visited Iraq, I believe, in January last time. There has been no visit planned since his last visit in January, none whatsoever.

Now, imagine the surprise -- I'm the American ambassador here in Baghdad -- imagine the surprise that I am hearing on radio and television, and reading in the press here, that Vice President Biden is about to arrive. When I heard the first three, four, even five reports, I just laughed. But then, when it got to the twentieth time I heard this, I actually called his office, just to make sure. And I can assure you there is no such visit planned.

If you can find the source of that story, I would really appreciate it. Use all of your investigative journalists you have, and let me know what the source of that story is. Because it is quite interesting that a story that, as far as we know, had zero foundation, became believed by everybody, including the idea that he had already arrived at the airport. This rumor was -- I'm sorry to continue on this, but this rumor was so strong, I actually considered, instead of just denying the rumor, saying, "Well, he already left." But let me just say briefly that Vice President Biden has a great interest in following events in Iraq, and does so very closely. General Odierno and I have had many of these

video teleconferences with Vice President Biden. I am pleased to say the vice president reads the reports that we send in from here. So, at an appropriate time, I am sure he will look forward to returning. And we will be the first to let you know when that is.

QUESTION: (Via translator) There is some news that there might be a conditional deal between the U.S. and Iran regarding its nuclear program, on the condition that it will stop intervening in Iraq. What is the extent of this rumor?

AMBASSADOR HILL: I can absolutely deny that. And I can also tell you that our relations with Iraq have nothing to do with our lack of relations with Iran. I really -- I understand the close proximity of Iraq to Iran. I know why people ask about Iran and Iraq a lot. But I want to stress to you, when we are talking about our policy to Iran, it is a very separate matter from our policy with Iraq.

Remember, I have said on many occasions we desire to build a long-term relationship with Iraq across many fields -- culture, economics, political relations. We desire this strong relationship, long-term relationship, with Iraq. How could we have a strong long-term relationship with Iraq, if we defined it in terms of our relations with another country?

QUESTION: (Via translator) I have a general question, why the U.S. is not exerting any effort to help Iraq economically, especially in the area of power generation, given its private relationship and close relationship with Iraq.

AMBASSADOR HILL: Yes. First of all, we have done a lot of help to Iraq on power generation. We have worked very closely with large American companies. We have brought them in. We have done considerable work with our engineers. We have considered power generation a major goal that we want to assist the Iraqis with. We have really done a lot of work in this area, and will continue to do more work in this area, because we realize more work needs to be done.

You notice that the Iraqi Government recently announced that there will be a third round of hydrocarbon bidding. And the purpose of that is to develop gas fields that would be co-located with electrical generation plants. And that is something that we are very interested in participating in.

More generally, though, I would like to see more American companies operating in Iraq. For example, we have a delegation of agriculture companies coming next month. I would like to see a lot more of that type of interest in Iraq. Already there are American companies operating here, in terms of infrastructure and other areas. But I would like to see a lot more, and I'm sure more will come as the security situation continues to improve.

QUESTION: (Via translator) A question about the formation of the new government. Do you expect that you, as an American ambassador, would be invited to attend the

discussions between the political entities regarding the formation of the government, like used to happen before -- Ambassador Crocker?

And also, the other question is, once the government is formed, do you think that there will be more bilateral agreements to improve the overall relationship between the U.S. and Iraq?

AMBASSADOR HILL: As to the question of being invited to sessions, I hope not. When you visit a restaurant, you usually try to avoid the kitchen. But, more seriously, of course we are very interested in the dialogue, and we are very open to talking to all people engaged in the dialogue. And we are very interested in helping people engage in dialogue.

But we are very respectful that this has to be an Iraq process, because if there is a perception that the U.S. is intervening, who else will intervene? Everyone will think that they have a right to intervene. And already I think we have to be very vigilant against countries intervening.

So, I think the right position for us is to be very interested, talking to all sides, but not intervening.

The second part of her question was --

QUESTION: (Via translator) Are you going to sign agreements that are more, you know, inclusive, that include more of the areas of development, given that the new government is going to be more stable than the current government?

AMBASSADOR HILL: Yes. We have something called a Strategic Framework Agreement, which is kind of a companion agreement that went along with the Security Agreement. And it's a very good agreement. It's a good framework. But I think we really need to fill out that framework and do more with it.

I mean, again, I would like to see a lot more American activity in the economy here. I mean, you have had so many American experts come here and give you advice all day and all night. I think what you really need is for American businesses to come here, work with Iraqi businesses, and actually build some things.

And that's why it is very important that this new government has some really quality people working on these types of economic issues. I mean, you've come through four years where the government had to be very concerned about security. And the next government will, too. But the next government, I think, also needs to be very concerned about getting some of the economic programs that have just been started in the previous government -- to get those moving more quickly.

I am very optimistic about this period. I think we are entering a period where you are going to begin to see some real improvements in the economy such that, you know, when you look at your children, you can say, you know, "These kids are going to have a better life than I did." And I think that will be very important, when Iraqis feel that.

QUESTION: (Via translator) Many people see that the role of the United States is the role of a sleeping giant. Basically, you know that Iraq is still under Chapter VII, and also Iraq -- the Security Agreement itself has an article that allows the U.S. Government to intervene to protect the process, the constitutional process, in Iraq. So, why is this not activated?

AMBASSADOR HILL: Well, first of all, with respect to Chapter VII, our desire, according to Article XXV of the Security Agreement, we want to make sure that we do all we can to help Iraq get out from under Chapter VII. We consider Chapter VII something that Iraq should be out from. And, therefore, we committed ourselves to help.

Secondly, as I have said before, we have a great interest in seeing a positive outcome here. We want to see a successful Iraq, and we will do all we can to ensure that there is a successful Iraq. But we will do that in an appropriate way that will be accepted by the Iraqi people, not in a way that will be seen as interference, and in a way that would undermine Iraq's sovereignty and, therefore, Iraq's future.

I can assure you we are in touch with all the major entities here, major political entities. We talk to them every day, and often every night. We are very, very heavily engaged in this country. We want to make sure that the right decisions are made here. But we cannot be expected to make decisions that the Iraqi Government or Iraqi political coalitions need to make for themselves. And we would like to create a situation where Iraqi politicians will make decisions because they want to ensure that those decisions are consistent with building a long-term relationship with the U.S.

QUESTION: (Via translator) There was a statement by a deputy commander of U.S. forces saying that there is intervention by Iran in the Iraqi affairs. And this intervention is apparent by the decisions of the Accountability and Justice Committee, by people like Mr. Ahmed Chalabi and Ali al-Lami, who are known to have connection to Iranian intelligence. What is your comment on this?

AMBASSADOR HILL: You know, I am not sure there is any value served by us making additional comments on this. I think the Iraqi presidency has spoken, I think the courts have spoken. And I would rather move on here.

QUESTION: (Via translator) Mr. Ambassador, you mentioned the interest of the United States to build a long-term relationship with Iraq. Is part of this effort by United States to work with the neighboring countries of Iraq to change their policies toward Iraq?

AMBASSADOR HILL: Yes. We think it's very important for all your neighbors to come to an understanding that this new Iraq is here to stay. We want them to come to understand that a strong, democratic, and peaceful Iraq is very much in their interests. That is, they have nothing to fear from the positive developments of this country. We want to make sure they understand that a dictatorship here or aggressiveness from here is not in their interests.

We believe it is possible that Iraq will have better relations with its neighbors in the future. But we also believe that more work needs to be done. We need to do more, Iraq needs to do more, especially Iraq's neighbors need to do more to build those relationships.

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